

Earliest memories of Brazil. Places related to adolescence in the autobiographical texts of Tomasz Łychowski

Pierwsza pamięć Brazylii. Miejsca dorastania w tekstach autobiograficznych Tomasza Łychowskiego

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Słowa kluczowe

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Abstract

The article describes the function of “autobiographical places” in the memoir book *My Way to the Moon* and the essay *Post scriptum* from the volume *Post scriptum e outros textos* by Tomasz Łychowski, a Polish-Brazilian poet. Existing geographical locations – Vitória, Fazenda do Secretário, Vassouras and Rio de Janeiro – mark the stages of adaptation of a teenage refugee from Europe to the reality of the country of settlement – Brazil. The author shows the path of his life by recreating the process of moving from one place to another and building relationships with people he meets in each of the topographical locations.

Abstrakt

W tekście opisano funkcje, jakie pełnią „miejsca autobiograficzne” w książce wspomnieniowej *Moja droga na księżyc* oraz eseju *Post scriptum* z tomu *Post scriptum e outros textos* autorstwa Tomasza Łychowskiego, polsko-brazylijskiego poety. Autentyczne miejsca geograficzne – Vitória, Fazenda do Secretário, Vassouras oraz Rio de Janeiro wyznaczają etapy adaptacji nastoletniego uchodźcy z Europy do rzeczywistości kraj osiedlenia – Brazylii. Drogę swego życia autor ukazuje poprzez odtworzenie procesu przechodzenia z jednej przestrzeni do drugiej oraz budowania relacji z ludźmi spotykanymi w kolejnych miejscach topograficznych.

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The purpose of this article is a description and interpretation of the autobiographical places present in the autobiographical texts by Tomasz Łychowski – Polish-Brazilian writer – marking the stages of his growing into the country of settlement. The literary material which was used as a research basis are two autobiographical works by Łychowski: his book *My Way to the Moon* and an essay *Post scriptum* from the volume *Post scriptum e outros textos*.

The autobiographical volume *Moja droga na księżyc* was published in Warsaw in 2010¹. In the same year, the Portuguese edition *Meu caminho para a lua. Como sobrevivi à II Guerra Mundial*² was published in Rio de Janeiro. Two years later, also in Rio, the English edition was published – *My Way to the Moon. How I survived WW II*³. The Polish edition was the first to be created and then, successively, texts in Portuguese and English. The three versions are not identical, the author added short fragments while re-writing the text. The narrative told by the author of *My Way to the Moon* takes the form of a series of associative memories and is realised by recalling episodes and fragmentary threads. Łychowski creates “a stained glass window”, “an album”, “a puzzle”, which are terms that most accurately reflect the essence of the structure of the work. The author weaves a narrative consisting of stories and digressions about himself, most often in chronological order, relating to his family, home and the town he comes from as well as his experiences of war-time youth and professional, writing and artistic activity. Correspondingly to the story he tells, he also recalls his poems. An integral part of the text are photos of people and places as well as scans of documents.

The language of the autobiography, in true chronicler's spirit, succinct and sometimes laconic hides deep layers of emotions. The autobiography was created at the request and inspiration of the author's son, Raphael and is a literary message of an extremely intimate contact between three generations of the Łychowski family.

Tomasz Łychowski's biography of, similarly to many migrants', is surprising and unusual. He was born in 1934 in Angola. His mother, Gertrude née Seefeld came from the small village Chorinchen near Berlin. His father,

¹ T. Łychowski, *Moja droga na księżyc*, Warszawa 2010.

² T. Łychowski, *Meu caminho para a lua. Como sobrevivi à II Guerra Mundial*, Rio de Janeiro 2010.

³ T. Łychowski, *My way to the Moon. How I survived WW II*, Rio de Janeiro 2012.

Tadeusz Łychowski, a former legionnaire, serviceman, agronomist specialising in tropical agriculture, who was born in Kiev, son of a lawyer and a social activist, managed a coffee plantation in Angola. Due to the difficulties they encountered, in 1938 they decided to return to Europe. The outbreak of World War II caught them in Warsaw. Both parents became involved in underground activities which led to their arrest in 1942. All three, including their eight year-old son, were imprisoned in Pawiak, from where Tadeusz was taken to Auschwitz, and later to Buchenwald. He lived to see the end of the war. At that time, Gertrude, after being released from Pawiak, was ordered to settle in Germany. After the surrender of Germany, Gertrude and Tomasz, miraculously saved once again, this time by a merciful Russian soldier, found themselves in a DP camp, first in Berlin and then in several others. They reached Antwerp where they waited for a visa to Angola. At that time they were reunited with Tadeusz. They decided to go to Brazil because they knew Portuguese which they had learned while living in Angola. Upon their arrival in Rio de Janeiro, Tomasz's father was briefly arrested on suspicion of being an agitator and this because the captain of the ship had sent a cable to Rio accusing Tadeusz of sedition. A kind of revenge for Tadeusz's condemnation of the very precarious conditions during the crossing. After a year in Brazil, Tadeusz died of a heart condition. Gertrude and Tomasz managed to survive thanks to their resourcefulness and kindness of many people of different origin. Tomasz got married. He has four children. He graduated in English philology and even worked in the same field for many years. He dabbled in politics. He was socially active for the Polish diaspora in Brazil. He prepared articles for Portuguese and Polish magazines. At the same time, he wrote poetry, painted, published books, and exhibited his art works. He wrote and still writes in three languages: Portuguese, Polish and English. Working with both Brazilian and Polish publishing houses he published volumes of poetry and prose: *My Parnas* (1956), *Glimpses/Vislumbres* (1996), *Voices/Vozes* (1998), *Powiewy/Brisas* (2000), *Graniczne progi/Limiaries de fronteira/Thresholds* (2004), *Spotkania/Encontros* (2006), *Skrzydła/Asas* (2008), *My way to the Moon* (2010), *Meu caminho para a lua* (2010), *My way to the Moon. How I survived WWII* (2012), *Recomeço* (2014), *Views. Selected Poems* (2016), *Post scriptum e outros textos* (2018), *Brama/O portao* (2020). In 2022, his next volume of poetry, *Noah's Ark*, and a new edition of *My Way to the Moon*, extended by memories from 2010–2020 will be published.

The places highlighted in *My Way to the Moon* are semantic and symbolic equivalents of authentic geographic places and related cultural images. To emphasise their function in the text, the term “autobiographical place” estab-

lished by Małgorzata Czerwińska is used⁴. Łychowski takes into account the spatial location of biographical events. The researchers of his work pointed this out. Aleksander Fiut, in the preface to the volume *Skrzydła/Asas*, noted: “a journey in space becomes for the poet – from the perspective of his long life – a rediscovery of the peculiarities of his own genealogy and the strange turns of fate that befell him, and which he accepts with amazing understanding and humility”⁵. This journey, the author continues, is essentially a question about one’s own identity and the turns of fate or Providence. Magdalena Bąk emphasized the difference between the poetic images of Brazil present in Polish literature until the 20th century, and the deep introspection of representations present in Łychowski’s texts (especially his poetry). The researcher argued that although he selects analogous elements of space (Rio de Janeiro, exotic nature), he depicts them with his eyes and interprets them as someone who recognizes this space with tenderness and its natural conditions⁶.

Critics and researchers unanimously emphasized the complexity of the poet’s life experiences, as well as his amazing serenity and spirit, his refusal to succumb to emigrant melancholy. Aleksandra Ziółkowska-Boehm wrote in a text published in the volume *Spojrzenia*:

The fate of Tomasz Łychowski is difficult, beautiful and painful – it is his own. The author, however, does not make it a banner, he does not flaunt it [...] he has almost lost nothing of the sensitivity of a boy to whom strange things happened, but also as an adult, they still happen. His openness to others, cordiality and sensitivity are appealing. The wisdom is a result of the journey of life, the experience of history, in the lands of Angola, Poland and Brazil. And none of that has turned into pain⁷.

The already quoted Aleksander Fiut in the pages of “Fraza” stated: “Nothing is more alien to him than the Polish blinding suffering and eternal grudge against the whole world. Against all odds, he finds in his life a deep although hidden meaning”⁸.

The subsequent places of the private Odyssey listed in *My Way to the Moon* in chronological order, automatically call people from the past who, with their long or even very brief presence, influenced the author’s way of

⁴ M. Czerwińska, *Miejsca autobiograficzne*, „Teksty Drugie” 2011, No. 5, p. 190.

⁵ A. Fiut, *Przedmowa*, [in:] Łychowski T., *Skrzydła/Asas*, przedmowa/prefacio A. Fiut, Warszawa 2008, p. 9.

⁶ M. Bąk, 2020, *Brazylia Tomasza Łychowskiego/O Brasil de Tomasz Łychowski*, „Historia: Debates e Dendências”, Vol. 20, No. 3, p. 180.

⁷ A. Ziółkowska-Boehm, *Przedmowa*, [in:] Łychowski T., *Spojrzenia. Wiersze wybrane*, Rio de Janeiro 2016, pp. 9–10.

⁸ A. Fiut, *Wtajemniczenia w Rio*, „Fraza” 2020, No. 1–2 (107–108), p. 16.

thinking about the world. In his memory, these people are inextricably linked with a strictly defined geographical space. In his autobiography, Łychowski reconstructs the point on the Earth and the time of the meeting. He leans out of the present towards this past time. According to Juhani Pallasmaa's interpretation of Łychowski's writing the processes of remembering and recreating architecture, imagination, memory and perception of the world constantly interact⁹. The author shows the path of his life by recreating the process of moving from one realm to another¹⁰.

In *My Way to the Moon*, the memory of successive locations recalls a person, while a person's memory recalls a specific location. Places correlated with a person emphasize interpersonal relations, their character, durability and meaning. In Łychowski's story, these relations and the places where they are established and maintained (also disappear or are, lost) are inseparably connected with each other. The author precisely defines the authentic geographical location and is aware of his cultural heritage. People appearing on the pages of *My Way to the Moon* are mentioned by their first and last names, characterized by tenderness, or at least – understanding for human handicap. The author pays tribute to those who helped him survive, saved his life, gave necessary and adequate help at a specific time and place. Relationships with people and places led Łychowski to the point where he could feel at home in it¹¹.

Vitória – the first meeting

The author's memory of the sea journey along the shores of Brazil is associated with the sensual experience of the climate of the tropics. The heat, surprising for those arriving – as Henryk Siewierski wrote in a poem dedi-

⁹ Juhani Pallasmaa, studying the complexity of the processes of remembering and recreating places and the role of the senses in the perception of architecture, emphasized the importance of “the innate ability to recall and imagine places. [...] We are constantly building a huge city of recall and reminders, and all the cities we visit are components of the metropolis in our mind”. See: J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry. Architektura i zmysły*, transl. by M. Choptiany, Kraków 2012, p. 79.

¹⁰ Georges Perec emphasized that there is no one space, but there are plenty of small pieces of space around us. In this perspective, “living means moving from one space to another”. See: G. Perec, *Przestrzenie*, transl. by A. Daniłowicz-Grudzińska, postscript by J. Gondowicz, Kraków 2011, p. 12.

¹¹ The poet Paul Leminski, who died in Curitiba in 1989, and who was a descendant of Polish emigrants who settled in Brazil, coined the term “ex-foreign” in a poem included in *Ex estraanho*. See: P. Kilanowski, *O tym, co można ujrzyć po drugiej stronie lustra, czyli garść refleksji o odbiciach, tłumaczeniach i wierszach*, „Postscriptum Polonistyczne” 2018, No. 1 (21), p. 125.

cated to Tomasz Łychowski – “the island of the north sea” (i.e. of Europe), prompted passengers to take mattresses on board in the evening and spend the night there¹². The idyllic nature of the image remembered by a teenage boy derives from his sense of melting into the ocean space, subjecting his body to the slight swaying of waves, exposure to the gusts of the sea wind from the sight of the sun rising over the horizon. This multifaceted, sensual experience evokes associations with the state of absolute happiness defined in our culture as heaven on earth. “For me then aged fourteen [...], however, there were [...] splendid, unforgettable instances”¹³.

The first place on the Brazilian mainland mentioned by Łychowski is Vitória, from 1940 the capital of the state of Espírito Santo. The geographical location of this city that dates back to the 16th century makes it extremely beautiful. The city was founded on a small island in the Gulf of Marask, into which waters flow from numerous rivers.

Reaching the shores of the South American continent marks a very important turning point in the author’s biography. In this port city, his senses were able to soak up the atmosphere of Brazil for the first time. His senses of hearing, smell and taste were clearly activated, which set a person in space. In this place, at the junction of the Brazilian land and the Atlantic Ocean, his first meeting with the local population took place. A fourteen-year old refugee met them and remembered them as a group keenly interested in strange newcomers who, during the renovation of a dilapidated ship, out of sympathy and compassion, voluntarily fed refugees from Europe. The role of intermediaries between “us” – 800 passengers of the Charlton Sovereign ship and “them” was performed by his Portuguese-speaking father – Tadeusz Łychowski and a local journalist.

Fazenda do Secretário – an adventure

Thanks to friends from Poland whom he met in Rio, Tadeusz Łychowski, a tropical agriculture agronomist by profession, got a job as a manager at the Fazenda do Secretário farm located in the state of Rio de Janeiro, half an hour away from the town of Vassouras. The central place of the fazenda was a beautiful, white, spacious, colonial-style house that once belonged to a dignitary at the court of Emperor Pedro II. The well-kept house was surrounded by a beautiful garden with tropical plants. Fourteen-year-old Tomasz spied on the life of local people and experienced intense Latin emotion:

¹² H. Siewierski, *Tomasz Łychowski: Inna Odyseja*, [in:] *Szkice brazylijskie*, Warszawa 2016, p. 236.

¹³ T. Łychowski, *My Way to the Moon*, op. cit., p. 51.

To me, an avid reader of books on the Far West, Secretario became the fulfilment of my teenager dreams. I would ride on horseback every day together with the vaqueiros (Brazilian cowboys), would learn how to tame wild horses and how to lasso cattle. For one whole year that was my heaven on earth¹⁴.

When Gertrude Łychowska left to care for her ailing husband in Rio, Tomasz wandered around the empty rooms of the big house, helpless and terrified. Salvation came during visits to the hut belonging to the washerwoman, Dona Dejanira, where after dusk a candle was lit and people said *Boa noite* (good night) to each other.

Vassouras – survival

The central place of the town of Vassouras, to which Tomasz moved after the death of his father, was the Eufrasia Teixeira Hospital, in which he got a job thanks to the help of Dona Dejanira's son. Sister Paulina, his boss and saviour at the hospital, helped him overcome several existential predicaments. Seeing his great loneliness and poverty, she gave him some of the money she earned, which was enough for him to buy a bus ticket. It was to her, the Angel as she was known and to the convent where she lived, that Tomasz Łychowski set off on a sentimental journey into the past. There is a poetic record of this expedition in the essay *Post scriptum*:

Memory. Departure at 09:00 from Novo Rio Bus Station. Direction: Vassouras. Travel time: approximately sixty years. On the way: Paracambi, Paulo de Frontin and other almost forgotten places. The bus climbs uphill. I try to remember a bend on the road, a river, a dam. Yes, they are still there! [...] Before I was in Vassouras several times, but only passing through. Sometimes with my family, sometimes alone, but always only fleeting visits. This time, it was you and me. Me and the city. Me and time. A "holistic" visit, binding places and time. Certainly a rewarding trip. Regenerating. Versatile. After such a trip, we are reborn. Past and present¹⁵.

Rio de Janeiro – home

For the first time, as he writes in his autobiography, he was enchanted by the beauty of Rio when Charlton Sovereign, brought to good working con-

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 56.

¹⁵ T. Łychowski, *Post scriptum*, [in:] idem, *Post scriptum e outros textos*, Rio de Janeiro 2018, pp. 137, 142.

dition, entered Guanabara Bay: “The sight of the most beautiful city in the world takes our breath away”¹⁶.

In Rio, on Ilha das Flores, they spent some time in quarantine. A year later, Tadeusz survived a heart attack in Rio and had no money for a longer stay in the hospital. He was welcomed into a small apartment by friends from Poland. They gave him their only bed. He did not survive a second heart attack, though and died on the farm a few months later. “After his death my world came crashing down” – confesses the author¹⁷.

In 1952, thanks to the kindness of other people, Tomasz moved to Rio. Here he worked hard, taught, studied, engaged in social work, co-founded Polish organizations, got involved in politics, wrote poetry, worked as a journalist, painted pictures. Here he got married, here his children and grandchildren were born. This city became his haven, which he left for short spells. Aleksander Fiut recalled his incorporation into the fabric of the city: “Tomasz showed me around the old center of Rio, telling me about individual buildings. It was evident that he knew the history of this city very well and that he felt at home in it for many years”¹⁸.

Tomasz Łychowski repeatedly shows his fascination with the beauty of Guanabara Bay and Rio de Janeiro. Rio is considered by many people to be a place of phenomenal beauty and a rich, diverse cultural background. This is also how other Poles describe it after World War II¹⁹. Józef Czapski, who during his travels in South America gave lectures in Rio for Polish youth associated in the “Świetliki” circle (Tomasz Łychowski was the first president at that time) thought similarly about this city²⁰. “Streets in Rio are the most cultured in the world”, wrote Józef Czapski in a letter to his friend in 1955²¹. He explained to Ludwik Hering that this thought had arisen from observing people passing by. He was fascinated by the complexity of the urban world. Diversity that did not create a dissonance, but a mosaic community:

Cadillacs and Mercedes, and next to half-naked people and the poor, who for a moment do not feel smaller – less people than the bourgeoisie. – I will

¹⁶ T. Łychowski, *My Way to the Moon*, op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 55.

¹⁸ A. Fiut, *Wtajemniczenia w Rio*, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁹ This is how Aleksandra Pluta’s interlocutors speak about Rio. See: A. Pluta, *Droga do Rio. Historia polskich emigrantów*, Warszawa 2017.

²⁰ Z. Malczewski, *Obecność Polaków i Polonii w Rio de Janeiro*, Lublin 1995, p. 101; *Polonia. Sociedade Beneficente do Rio de Janeiro 130 Anos. Atividades beneficentes, culturais e sociais Relatos familiares da comunidade, Apoio Consulado Geral da Republica da Polonia em Curitiba*, ed. Łychowski T., Kepinski A., Rio de Janeiro 2021.

²¹ J. Czapski, L. Hering, *Listy 1939–1982*, V. 1, 4 września–16 stycznia 1959, postscript by A. Zagajewski, Gdańsk 2016, p. 214.

not forget some of the faces – little boys [...] who lead blind people down the street, with what careful delicacy – men returning after work with this almost dancing step into their booths that look like matchboxes²².

Rio, in Łychowski's autobiography (also in poetry), functions as a private place of settlement, as well as a place of dual status. It is a city where you live here and now, but also a city from the past, existing somewhere in space-time. The sensual tangibility here and now brings back smells, views of beaches, streets, buildings and people who appeared there at some point in time. Juhani Pallasmaa, already quoted, claimed that the stimulated human memory is able to evoke from the past an intense image of the experienced, almost tactile presence of a place "with all its sounds, smells and plays of light and shadow. I can even choose – he added – whether I want to walk on the sunny or shaded side of the street in a pleasant city from my memories"²³.

Mentioned locations: Vitoria, Secretario, Vassouras and Rio de Janeiro, Janeiro are genuine geographic places. In *My way to the Moon*, their appearance is biographically motivated. These places mark and define the stages of maturity and the gaining of self-awareness by the teenage narrator. Each of these topographic locations at the same time call the reader to pause and reflect upon their cultural context, including the Polish message about the exotic, the contradictory stories about Brazil as a hell or paradise, and upon Łychowski's the post-war migrations.

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²² Ibidem.

²³ J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry*, op. cit., p. 81.

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